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U.S.

Honduran President Hernández Implicated in Drug Trade

Incoming Biden administration faces challenge in dealing with Honduran corruption



Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández received millions of dollars from drug traffickers, according to new allegations.

PHOTO: MOISES CASTILLO/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By José de Córdoba

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MEXICO CITY—New York federal prosecutors made new allegations that Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández, a key Trump administration ally in efforts to stop illegal migrants, received millions of dollars from drug traffickers to help export tons of cocaine to the U.S.

The allegations against Mr. Hernández came in a filing made Friday night in the Southern District of New York in the case of Geovanny Fuentes Ramirez, an alleged Honduran drug trafficker who is in prison in New York, and is alleged to have run a lab that produced hundreds of tons of cocaine a month.

In the most explosive allegation in the filing, it said the president, 52 years old, boasted to Mr. Fuentes Ramirez that “he wanted to shove the drugs right up the noses of the gringos.”

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The claims underscore the difficult challenge posed by Honduras, one of the poorest countries in the hemisphere, to the incoming Biden administration. President-elect Joe Biden has promised a new emphasis on economic development, ending corruption and promoting the rule of law as a way of attacking the deep-rooted causes that push migrants from Central American countries to journey to the U.S.

“It will be a crucial test for the Biden administration,” said Michael Shifter, president of the Inter-American Dialogue, a Washington-based think tank. “It’s a government and a president who are very suspect of being involved in drug trafficking.”

The allegations aren’t the first against the president, whose brother Juan Antonio Hernández was convicted of drug trafficking in 2019. During that trial, testimony also implicated the president in protecting drug traffickers in exchange for bribes.

President Hernández is referred to in the filing against Mr. Fuentes as CC-4, or co-conspirator four, identifiable by references to his political position and by references to his younger brother. Mr. Hernandez, who was also listed as an unnamed co-conspirator in his brother’s trial, hasn’t been charged with any crime.

In a tweet, the Honduran government denied the allegations against Mr. Hernández. “The claim that Pres. Hernandez supposedly accepted drug money from a Geovanny Daniel Fuentes Ramirez, or gave protection or coordination to drug traffickers is 100% false,” an

official Honduran government twitter account said. The allegations were “based on lies of confessed criminals who seek revenge and to reduce their sentences.”

The filing alleges Mr. Hernández boasted of looting the country’s social security fund as well as U.S.-donated relief funds through fraudulent nongovernmental organizations.

During his brother’s trial in New York, U.S. prosecutors said the younger Hernández received \$1 million from legendary Mexican drug kingpin Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán Loera to fund the president’s political movement, a claim then denied by the Honduran government. The newest filing repeats that accusation. Mr. Guzmán was found guilty and is serving a life sentence.

“Because of my struggle against organized crime, I am the victim of a smear campaign led by drug traffickers, gang members, corrupt and purged police, confessed killers, colluding businessmen who finance these criminals, and politicians,” Mr. Hernández said in a 2019 speech at the United Nations as his brother went to trial.

The filing says that in meetings in 2013, Mr. Fuentes Ramirez paid the president, then a candidate, “tens of thousands of dollars” to ensure the Honduran military protected his drug shipments.

The money also bought legal immunity and safety from extradition, the filing said. In exchange, Mr. Fuentes Ramirez allegedly agreed to work with President Hernández, reporting to his younger brother Juan Antonio, the filing said.

President Hernández assumed power in 2014 and was re-elected in 2017, amid widespread allegations of fraud, for a term that finishes in January 2022. In the aftermath of the election, protesters took to the streets for weeks.

Under the Trump administration, the U.S. has been willing to overlook the charges of electoral fraud, corruption and drug trafficking dogging the president, who has been a willing partner in curbing illegal immigration to the U.S., the Trump administration’s priority in the region. In 2019, Mr. Hernandez signed an agreement to send some asylum seekers from third countries to Honduras.

“Hernandez did everything the Trump administration asked on immigration, and he got a free pass on corruption issues,” says Mr. Shifter. “Now, he won’t get a free pass. It will be a radical shift.”

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